

Act Your Age: Moral Imagination in the Virtual World

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1. Introduction - Harm, Wrongdoing and The Imagination

When a tyrant imagines his mortal enemy being destroyed in an unpleasant way he might not necessarily wish that enemy real harm, or indeed wish anything truly awful to happen to them at all. Likewise, I can claim to think about murdering someone without actually being compelled to commit murder. What occurs in these situations is an act of ‘immoral imagining’¹, the entertaining in thought of actions or activities considered morally wrong. The fact that the immoral acts are restricted to the imagination in these cases might suggest that what occurs is harmless but this is not, and should not be the case. Indeed, it has not always been the case at all. Within the Treason Act of 1351, there is the statement “When a man doth compass or imagine the Death of our Lord the king ... that ... ought to be judged Treason.”² The suggestion is that simply thinking about the death of the king is enough to be held accountable for Treason. Legally then, in 1351 someone might be arrested and punished for thinking about the death of the king; not actually trying to kill, or wanting the king dead, but simply entertaining the thought of the king being dead. On the face of it, this thirteenth century law seems absurd; if the king is not harmed, there appears no logic in punishing someone for treason. There is no victim here, nobody appears to suffer as a result of imagining the king dead.

At face value, there appears little justification in outlawing behaviour that doesn’t actually harm anyone else. However, immoral imagining is not something which can be judged purely in terms of harm, it is an act of a personal nature which calls into question the morality of those who entertain immoral thoughts. I would like to suggest that when I imagine something morally unacceptable I bring into disrepute the nature of myself as a morally sound person. So, the disgruntled peasant of 1351 who imagines the death of the king would not only be punished, but damage too their own moral character as a result of what they imagined. What we imagine should not be free of moral assessment purely because it is not real. Just because we cannot attach harm, or indeed a victim to what we imagine is no grounds with which to deem imaginings a harmless act. When we imagine acts which would be morally wrong if carried out, we commit

¹ At this stage the term ‘immoral imagining’ is used as a name alone rather than assuming it immoral to imagine certain things. Fuller discussion of this term will come later in the paper.

² ‘Revised Statute from The UK Statute Law Database, Treason Act 1351 (c. 2)’ <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/aep/1351/caep_13510002_enm_1> [accessed 15 May 2009].

an act of ‘harmless wrongdoing’. This seemingly harmless act of imagination is one which we might still deem wrong, or attach ‘wrongness’ to. The purpose of this paper will be to prove that immoral imagining is an example of harmless wrongdoing. This will be shown in a two step argument. Firstly, it will be proven that immoral imagining is wrong, and secondly that the pursuit of the immoral imagination within virtual worlds is wrong too. It is within virtual worlds that immoral imaginings might easily be indulged, so this is where the assessment of immoral imaginings and their nature as morally wrong will be focussed upon.

2. Feinberg’s Harmless Wrongdoing

In ordinary usage, there is a tendency to associate wrongful acts with the concept of harm. An act is considered a wrong one on the basis of it being harmful, and of causing harm to someone in some way. This also implies the need for a victim for an act to be considered harmful, but this is an unreasonable association. As Feinberg points out, “harm is both vague and ambiguous, and entangled with other concepts, like wrong.”³ This being the case, it is unnecessary that harm always exist for an act to be deemed wrong. There can be wrongs without harm. A person can commit a wrongful act without that act necessarily being a harmful one too. Feinberg struggles to present examples for this claim, conceding that “there are also examples, though less common ones, of wrongs that are not harms.”⁴ In the introduction to a volume on ‘harmless wrongdoing’, Feinberg presents very few examples of wrongful acts without harm, and speculates towards the possible existence of others. Feinberg’s key example is that of consensual homosexual acts between adults. This may be considered wrong because of the biblical injunction it defies; the act itself is devoid of victims, thus the act is wrong but harmless overall.

This notion of harmless wrongdoing is one which raises much debate and Feinberg admits that the idea is “controversial among moral philosophers.”⁵ This controversy exists as a result of the difficulty involved in formulating examples of harmless wrongdoings. As Feinberg suggests, it is more difficult to present examples of harmless wrongdoings than it is to theorise the existence of the term. Feinberg’s own example of consensual homosexual sex between adults raises some questions over the nature of harmless wrongdoing and how the term may be defined. There are many people who do not believe in the biblical injunction that Feinberg relies on, enough for there to be a substantial amount of people who would not consider consensual homosexual sex a case of harmless wrongdoing at all. Indeed, even if one is Christian, and believes that homosexual activity is wrong, then the consenting adults in the example actually *do* harm themselves. They commit a sin, and therefore damage their souls, so there is actually harm. Thus, if one is a Christian, no harm exists, and if one is a non-believer (and does not believe homosexuality to be wrong), then no wrong exists. This may seem problematic, but these are cases where harm is ‘harm to oneself’. This is an important point since Feinberg’s example may appear to fall into the trap of being harmful to oneself, and is therefore not a harmless wrongdoing at all, but harm to the self does not count towards cases of harmless wrongdoing. A harmless wrongdoing

³ Joel Feinberg, *Harmless Wrongdoing: The Moral Limits of The Criminal Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxvii.

⁴ *ibid.*, xxviii.

⁵ *ibid.*

only refers to wrongdoing where no second or third parties are harmed. Failure to recognise this point makes it far too easy to criticise examples of harmless wrongdoing on the basis that they involve harms to the self.

Therefore, an act of a harmless wrongdoing necessitates the following factors: “the morally illicit act in question does not adversely affect anyone’s interests ... furthermore, it is wrong without wronging any victim.”⁶ Taking this definition as a starting point, the aim of this paper will be to provide an example of harmless wrongdoing, and in doing so prove that the notion is not as controversial as Feinberg suggests. Under Feinberg’s model, there are two clear characteristics in examples which constitute a harmless wrongdoing. Firstly, that an act does not adversely affect anyone’s interests, and secondly that the act be wrong without actually wronging any victim.

3. Age Play - The Immoral Imagination

‘Age-play’ within a virtual world will be forwarded here as an example of harmless wrongdoing, and it will be shown that the example is in possession of Feinberg’s characteristics. In a virtual world such as Second Life there are instances where real harm is apparent, but these are instances of harmful wrongdoing rather than harmless wrongdoing. Second Life is a virtual world simultaneously accessed by multiple users by way of avatars that they create themselves. By October of last year, Second Life had over fifteen million users.⁷ The Official Guide to Second Life defines itself as “a virtual world ... It’s your virtual life.”⁸ Users can buy land in Second Life, marry each other or engage in other pastimes that we take for granted in real life. These are realistic engagements between real people, involving real currency and real binding agreements. In such cases, the actions that users take within the virtual world are realistic, they have real consequences and can be realistically harmful to those behind the avatars involved in an agreement or a marriage. Second Life’s very own slogan states ‘Your World. Your Imagination’. The slogan implies that there are not always instances where real harm can be attributed to virtual interactions. If Second Life is an imaginative world, then that which goes on inside it can also involve imaginative constructs, fantasy and those actions which might be impossible in real life. It is this type of interaction which relates to immoral imagining and harmless wrongdoing, because acts within the virtual world are harmless but may still be considered wrong.

‘Age play’ is a regressive role-play in which adults take on the role of children. This can involve sexual role-play in which adults pretend to be a parent and child in order to engage in a shared sexual fantasy. Within a virtual world, this takes the form of two consenting adults, most commonly one with an adult avatar and one with an avatar designed to resemble a child. “Age play occurs between two consenting adults, one of whom takes on the role of a child, and the other takes on the role of a caretaker.”⁹ Users of a virtual world may then take the adult

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ ‘Second Life Appoints New Euro Chief to Boost Business’, MarketingWeek (2008) <<http://www.marketingweek.co.uk/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=63112&d=258&h=262&f=3>> [accessed 17 May 2009].

⁸ Michael Rymaszewski, Wagner James Au, Mark Wallace, Catherine Winters, Philip Rosedale, Cory Ondrejka, Benjamin Batstone-Cunningham, *Second Life: The Official Guide* (Wiley-Interscience, 2006), p. 4.

⁹ ‘Age Play’, Conversation Between ‘Claudia’ and ‘nethacker’ regarding age play and what it entails (1999) <<http://www.iron-rose.com/IR/docs/ageplay.htm>> [accessed 15 May 2009].

and child-like avatars and engage in simulated sexual acts with them. The very nature of an avatar implies that there be a human being in charge of it, and that someone is responsible for the actions that an avatar undertakes. Behind every avatar is a person, a link between reality and the virtual world which is plainly obvious. An avatar has been defined as “a perceptible digital representation whose behaviours reflect those executed, typically in real time, by a specific human being.”¹⁰ If a child were to be in control of one of the avatars in the age play example, the act of engaging in simulated intercourse would be problematic, because a child is involved. No real child is involved or harmed in age play fantasies because two adults control the avatars engaged in the sexual act. This fact should not make the act any less morally problematic than a case where a real child is involved.

The morally problematic issue therefore appears as a result of what resembles a child taking part in a virtual sex act. This brings about the first of Feinberg’s characteristics, that an act does not adversely affect anyone’s interests for it to be considered a harmless wrongdoing. In the case of age-play, it is evident that the act has no negative effect upon the interests of any party, since it is between two consenting adults; the only issue at hand is the fact that one of the avatars resembles a child and the association this brings to morally wrong acts is a troubling one. Intuition tells us that ‘age play’ is morally wrong, and the reason for this must be made clearer. The second of Feinberg’s characteristics, that the act be wrong without wronging any victim is of greater importance than the first and will be focussed upon in order to address the intuitive feeling of moral wrongness associated with ‘age play’ and why this counts towards the act being a harmless wrongdoing.

It remains unclear why exactly we should react negatively towards age play since it is a seemingly harmless act; an example of an act considered wrong without any *real* harm occurring. If it is clear why ‘age play’ may be considered harmless, it is now important to distinguish why it can be considered wrong. When a subject merely imagines something as morally wrong as having sex with a child, there need not be a real life intention in existence. The subject need not necessarily want to have sex with a child, but they have entertained the thought in their imagination. Similarly, when two users engage in an age play scenario in a virtual world there need not be any real life intentions towards real children, but the act is an imaginative concept brought into a virtual world. This in itself is enough for a subject to be at fault morally, and for the act to be considered a wrong one. The reason for this stems from the accountability of moral imaginings - the idea that acts of imagination are morally assessable. In other words, those who entertain morally troubling concepts in imagination should be held accountable. Kendall Walton believes this to be the case for the reason that adoptive imagination is a morally corrupting process, stating it can be wrong to adopt “even in the imagination a moral view that I reject in reality.”¹¹ Walton uses the term ‘moral view’ to refer to those morally problematic views that people might accept in their imagination, but would reject in reality. An example is a claim such as: ‘The Holocaust was a good thing’. This is an view that we might accept in imagination when reading fictions, but in reality, are most likely to reject. Age players may not adopt any

¹⁰ Jeremy Bailenson, & Jim Blascovich, Avatars. In W. S. Bainbridge (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Computer Interaction* (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire, 2004), p. 65.

¹¹ Kendall L. Walton and Michael Tanner, ‘Morals In Fiction and Fictional Morality’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, 68 (1994), p. 34.

specific moral view, but they do adopt an imaginative pretence to morally problematic actions. In other words, the age player entertains in their imagination an action which would be wrong were it to be carried out in real life.

Walton holds that we have reasons to resist immoral imaginings of the type age play represent because such imaginings can affect our moral 'orientation'. By accepting moral views we know to be morally problematic we disorient our moral compass, as Walton puts it, and are drawn towards immoral concepts which would otherwise be repugnant. By adopting a view in imagination that is troubling in moral terms, I "might change my moral orientation; it might in this sense 'pervert the sentiments of my heart'."¹² Walton suggests that merely entertaining immoral thoughts can have an effect upon a person's morality, and that the process of adoptive imagining itself is corrupting. This being the case, it is up to the individual to effectively resist morally problematic imaginings in order to protect themselves from the corruption of moral values that Walton believes possible. In terms of the age play example, it is therefore necessary for individuals to resist such a morally troubling imagining, rather than actively engaging it. The notion of 'imaginative resistance' is one Richard Moran also discusses. According to Moran, 'imaginative resistance' occurs when an individual refuses to entertain or adopt immoral imaginings or moral responses the individual deems inappropriate.¹³ As morally accountable human beings, we therefore have a responsibility to resist immoral thoughts in order to protect our own moral characters. Those who fail to resist certain imaginings, and habitually entertain immoral imaginings are those with a moral character flaw. Age players fall into this category. The flaw of the age player is to entertain the morally problematic notion of a child as sexual object. No real child is harmed and the age player need not wish to have sex with a child in reality, but age play fantasy involves someone pretending to be a child, and using the child-like avatar to engage in a virtual sexual act. This sexualisation of a child is an immoral imagining, and failure to reject this amounts to a failure of a persons imaginative resistance. Essentially, the age player fails to resist the immoral imagining of age play and what the act entails.

The failure of age players to resist and reject such immoral imaginings implies that their actions are habitual. Moral judgement is usually reserved for examples of habit, and not for individual instances of emotions or passions. Amy Mullin draws from the Aristotelian notion that it is not only an individuals actions which are morally assessable, but their dispositions too.¹⁴ In doing so, Mullin suggests that Aristotle's conception of dispositions can be applied to acts of imagination. This implies that the imagination provides evidence of an individual's dispositions, and should therefore be morally assessable too. This is an important point, and one which goes some way to providing the necessary evidence for the moral accountability of the imagination. From this the reason why immoral imaginative concepts like that of age play can be considered wrong, becomes apparent. According to Mullin: "habitual acts of imagination, such as those that involve sexual exploitation of children, do seem clear instances of flaws in

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Richard Moran, 'The Expression of Feeling in Imagination', *The Philosophical Review*, 103, I (1994), pp. 75-106.

¹⁴ Amy Mullin, 'Moral Defects, Aesthetic Defects, and the Imagination', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62, III (2004), p. 252.

one's own moral character."¹⁵ Age play is an example of an act of imagination which Mullin suggests can provide evidence of a moral character flaw. Imaginings can be partly constitutive of dispositions, thus if a persons dispositions can be morally assessed then such an example of habitual immoral imagination is also morally assessable.

Indeed, that imaginings partly constitute dispositions and their morally assessable nature can be seen to be supposed in our present Judicial system. There is clear evidence that imaginative content plays a role in character assessment, implying that the imagination is open to moral assessment in a way that represents its influence on the nature of a person as a virtuous character. As a form of punishment, the offenders of specifically harmful acts commonly enter a process of rehabilitation. This places great emphasis upon not only what the culprit does, but also what they entertain in mere thought. If a murderer is incarcerated for committing murder their possible release is dependent upon the likelihood that they will re-offend, and if they present any danger to the public. This likelihood is measured by study of the inmate's behaviour, but also of their mental state. The inmate who no longer entertains the thought of killing is more likely to be released than the one who still does. Of course, people can lie about having these thoughts, but consider it to be the case that we can determine when people have certain thoughts about doing bad things and when they do not. If an offender commonly thinks about murdering people then this seems enough to deny their release. If we did not obviously place high importance upon that which we merely entertain in thought, then this state of affairs would not exist and the offenders with and without murderous imaginings would have an equal chance of being released.

In this example, the imaginative content of the murderer is taken to imply their disposition towards murdering again. This is a case of the imagination being morally assessed, and one which suggests that people are indeed accountable for their imaginative content. The inmate who does not imagine committing murder again is one who displays the imaginative resistance that was evidently not in place when they committed their original crime. The inmate who entertains the thought of murdering again shows that their character is morally flawed in the way that Mullin suggests. The habitual entertainment of immoral thoughts implies that the individual is more open to the immoral, and as such their disposition towards murdering again appears more likely. To imagine murdering someone is therefore wrong firstly because the idea of murder itself is morally wrong, and secondly because the entertainment of such an immoral imagining results in the corruption of moral character. This is another example of a seemingly harmless imaginative act which can actually be morally assessed, considered wrong and the imaginer held accountable for. If imaginings can be partly constitutive of dispositions, the implication for age players is a damning one.

Just as the murderer that entertains the thought of murder is deemed more likely to commit a crime, the age player that entertains the immoral idea of simulated child molestation is disposed towards immoral acts, and more likely to entertain similar immoral thoughts. As Mullin suggests, "repeated adoption in the imagination of an immoral perspective might have morally damaging effects."¹⁶ This being the case, to adopt the imaginative content that age players do is to entertain the 'immoral perspective', and therefore destroy the 'moral innocence' that we otherwise have.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

Furthermore, Mullin believes that the habitual adoption of an immoral imagination will not only lead to character flaws, it will ultimately confuse our moral sensitivities, and disorient our moral compass in the way Walton has suggested. To entertain notions such as those involved in age play or the imagination of murder will inevitably lead to “a failure to recognise when immoral things are happening.”¹⁷ The fact that immoral imaginings such as those age play involves can lead to a degradation of ones moral character is the reason that they may be considered wrong. Age players appear to repeatedly adopt an immoral perspective which Mullin believes leads to the moral damage suggested here.

It is morally wrong to merely imagine immoral concepts then, because the entertainment of such concepts result in a dissolution of moral character. The failure to practice imaginative resistance is to exhibit this moral character failing. To lose sight of what is morally right and wrong, and display the inability to distinguish between the two is an example of moral insensitivity. Jacobson makes a similar point in a paper distinguishing between morally sensitive and virtuous people.¹⁸ This distinction shows why we should practice imaginative resistance, and why those who do not display moral character failings.¹⁹

In an appeal to Moran-style imaginative resistance, Jacobson makes the following definition: “the virtuous audience will resist feeling ... what they deem it wrong to feel; while a morally sensitive audience will be unable to feel that way.”²⁰ Related back to the age play example, the virtuous audience are those that view age play negatively, refusing to engage the immoral imaginative concepts related to it. Naturally, this means that the sensitive audience are those that simply cannot entertain age play in any way, even in imagination. The virtuous audience have the ability to entertain the idea of age play, their virtue stems from the fact they are able to resist feeling anything towards it, because they know it to be wrong. Jacobson also believes that “enough practice in resistance might, through habituation, make a virtuous spectator into a morally sensitive one.”²¹ This mirrors in the opposite direction, Mullin’s point that habitual immoral imagination can lead to character flaws. The habitual resistance of immoral thoughts leads to a stage where we are simply unable to entertain immoral ideas at all. It is preferential that people go through this evolution; the morally sensitive person is of sounder moral character than the virtuous person. It is better to be unable to entertain the immoral than it is to have to resist, and be open to resistive failure. If it is a character flaw to habitually entertain immoral imaginings, as Mullin suggests, then the inability to entertain them at all suggests a character virtue. This being the case, the age player, and those who entertain such immoral imaginings display an insensitivity which implies they may never become morally sensitive persons in the sense Jacobson implies. Just as the murderer who imagines murdering again is held accountable for being more likely disposed to murdering, the age player is more disposed to immoral concepts. Age players fail to resist immoral imaginings when they engage their fantasies within a virtual

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Daniel Jacobson, ‘In Praise of Immoral Art’, *Philosophical Topics*, 25, 1 (1997), pp. 155-199.

¹⁹ Of course, this might be an example of harm to the self, and in imagining certain things I harm my own moral character, but this is still an example of a harmless wrongdoing, as the imaginative act harms no 2nd or 3rd parties but is still wrong. This victim cannot be the self; there must be a wrongdoing without harm to another party for the example to be one of harmless wrongdoing and this is the case here.

²⁰ Jacobson, ‘In Praise of Immoral Art’, *Philosophical Topics*, 25, 1 (1997), p. 186.

²¹ *ibid.*

world. An age player pursues their imagining, wishing it to become more than just an imagining; they display a disposition towards the sexualisation of children in the virtual world. This means they are unable to work towards being a morally sensitive spectator due to their consistent engagement of the immoral imagination.

Everyone has a moral duty to behave in a certain way, to adhere to specific moral guidelines in their everyday conduct. There are specific acts and actions which are deemed immoral, and the virtuous person can recognise these, and actively resist committing them. The morally sensitive amongst us are simply unable to entertain anything they consider immoral, this inability shows that they have a strong moral character. These people need not resist the immoral, since the inclination towards it is not there. Age players then, are those with the character flaws that render them immoral people. The murderer up for parole is morally insensitive if they imagine murdering once released. This is because they fail to resist immoral imaginings, and actively engage the immoral imagining, suggesting they would, or are likely to, re-offend. Such a person cannot become morally sensitive since the fact that they display no imaginative resistance to the immoral thought of murder and habitually entertain the thought instead implies Mullin's 'flaws in moral character'. Similarly, age players do the same.

As Seiriol Morgan suggests, "the complex and frequently dark nature of human sexual desire requires a certain kind of ethical sensitivity from us, and also places upon us obligations not to act on certain sexual impulses we might have."²² As cited from Mullin earlier "acts of imagination that involve sexual exploitation of children, do seem clear instances of flaws in one's moral character."²³ While age play does not involve real children, and is therefore not strictly of the imaginative type Mullin suggests, it does qualify as one of the 'dark desires' that Morgan believes we should not entertain, and refrain from acting upon. Age play is a fantasy, in which its participants simulate the molestation of a child. No child is harmed by what exists as an imagination within a virtual world. It is however, a fantasy which appears to go against the idea of imaginative resistance, and is one that the morally sensitive person would clearly be unable to entertain. As moral beings we have the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad. In the first instance it is up to us to distinguish between good desires and bad desires. Then it is necessary to know that bad desires should not be acted upon, and that we should only entertain desires we deem good. Once we make this distinction, it is imaginative resistance that stops us from pursuing bad desires. Age players then, lack the moral sensitivity Morgan believes necessary to distinguish between dark and acceptable desires. Not only this, age players fail to resist immoral imaginings because of this, and as a result the distinction between good (acceptable) and bad (dark) desires is blurred. Since the age player engages a bad desire when they pursue their fantasy in a virtual world their imaginative resistance has failed, as well as calling into question their ability to distinguish between right and wrong desires in the first place.

Relying on a Kantian notion, Morgan believes our propensity towards certain desires can be shaped by imagination, which is similar to the Aristotelian point of dispositions being partly formed by the imagination: "motives emerge from our freedom and are potentially reshaped into

²² Seiriol Morgan, 'Dark Desires', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 6, IV (2003), p. 378

²³ Mullin, p. 252.

more complex forms by imagination.”²⁴ Kant refers to passions as ‘*Leidenschaft*’, and believes that these passions are difficult to control through reason. Suggesting that our passions come from our nature as free, sociable creatures, Kant refers to the conflict that exists in society between the free creatures as they attempt to impose their will upon others in order to gratify their passions. This gives rise to “a kind of primal conflict in human society” in which people are subordinated and treated as “a means to their own ends.”²⁵ Kant concludes from this state of affairs that “A desire which has become habitual is an inclination.”²⁶ The imaginative desire that age players feel is of a morally troubling nature that suitably fits Kant and Morgan’s concerns. It is a desire as habitual as the murderer imagining murdering as to become a disposition, an inclination, and one that proves the individual that has that desire to be morally flawed. There are certain desires, and imaginative concepts we have a duty to resist at the least, and completely reject at best. Since immoral imagining is morally corrupting to moral character, to entertain the idea of age play is wrong. Age players fail to resist immoral imaginings and their own moral sensitivity in favour of pursuing a fantasy. Not only this, the nature of age play implies that it may well be even more difficult for reason to control than Kant suggests. Age players habitually pursue their fantasy in a virtual world where they can visualise and interact with likeminded individuals in order to make their fantasy something more than just an imagining. Clearly then, the age play fantasy does not just exist in the mind. Due to this, it appears that it will be more difficult for reason to control the fantasy, since the extent of the fantasy is much greater than anything that might exist in the mind alone. Kant’s conflict therefore encompasses the nature of age play and why it is rejected by morally discerning individuals. If reason has difficulty in controlling purely imaginative fantasies as Kant suggests, then fantasies engaged within virtual worlds, which are of a more active nature, must be even harder to control.

The intuitive feeling of wrongness felt when presented with what age play involves is moral sensitivity coming into play. Just as the morally sensitive individual can reject imagining murder because they know it to be wrong, they can reject age play because it carries the same feeling of wrongness. To entertain immoral imaginings is therefore to pursue a desire that becomes habitual, providing assessable evidence of an individual inclination towards the immoral. Since the immoral imagination is corrupting, and hence morally assessable it is morally wrong to imagine certain activities. Age play is once such activity. An age player displays no imaginative resistance, and therefore does not have the feeling that what they do is wrong. This represents the conflict which exists in those virtuous enough to reject the idea, and those age players devoid of the moral sensitivity to do the same. To entertain certain immoral thoughts shows an insensitive moral character, and it is certainly a step further to act out these imaginings in the way age players do.

Age play might be a harmless acting out of an imagining, devoid of a victim, but is still a wrongful act. Morgan suggests that: “behaviour that would make one person very unhappy can leave another entirely unconcerned, and it is hard to tell what will upset who.”²⁷ Despite this,

²⁴ Morgan, p. 384.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. By Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 12.

²⁷ Morgan, p. 406.

there are still ‘paradigm cases’ with which we can shape our moral reasoning. Notions such as murder, rape, and paedophilia are examples of such cases, moral concepts abhorrent enough that they can be used as benchmarks for moral rights and wrongs. It is fair to say that imagining rape, murder and paedophilia will make the majority of people ‘unhappy’, if not morally outraged. Since the habitual entertainment of such imaginings leads to damage of moral character, immoral imaginings are wrong. This being the case, age players not only commit wrongful acts when they engage in fantasies within a virtual world, they take an immoral imagining further by actively pursuing it, representing it in a virtual world. Virtual worlds, like the real world, are not risk free and are certainly not free of moral assessment. If the imagination can be morally assessed, as has been forwarded, then the virtual world is a way of representing this morally assessable imagination, and acting upon what once existed only in the mind. For this reason, it is wrong to act upon imaginings as age players do within a virtual world, because the imagination is morally accountable.

4. Age Play - Virtual Worlds And The Pursuit of Fantasy

The accountability of the imagination suggests that the mind, and virtual world should not provide a free pass to do whatever one pleases, then defend this by simply stating that nobody has been harmed. Adopted immoral imaginings are character corrupting, and to adopt in thought ideas which are immoral is a damaging process. The virtual world provides freedom to an extent not possible in the real world. Within it, fantasies and desires can be pursued without the condemnation they would receive were they pursued in the real world. Age players do not therefore, face the moral analysis they would face in the real world, they can act upon their fantasies in relative privacy, within a virtual world. The virtual world is not however, risk free in the same sense that a properly fictional world can be said to be. Walton suggests that “the divergence between fictionality and truth spares us pain and suffering we would have to experience in the real world. We realize some of the benefits of hard experience without having to under go it.”²⁸ This contrasts somewhat with the nature of a virtual world. In imagined cases, and within Walton’s fictional worlds, I am free of the guilt, fear and pain that I might otherwise experience had my experience been real. A fictional world is therefore risk free in the sense that it allows agents to experience and undergo emotions without fear of repercussions; the agent is not damaged or hurt by the victory of the blood thirsty tyrant onscreen or on the page as they would be had the tyrant literally rampaged through their town. This much is obvious, and it is fair to conclude from these points that a fictional world is a harmless construct of a purely imaginary nature. A virtual world, on the other hand, might be similarly harmless, but it is not risk free, or free from moral assessment in the same way fictions are.

The virtual world provides a tool with which moral imaginings might be acted out, or represented. Imaginative objects of fantasy and desire; of actions rejected in reality might easily be pursued. By signing up to a virtual world, registering a username and creating an avatar, an individual is engaging in something more than just lazily sitting around imagining a morally problematic concept. It is easy enough for any individual to be told to ‘imagine yourself killing

²⁸ Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 68.

your worst enemy', but this is different from engaging an imagining of this nature by seeking to pursue it with likeminded individuals. Indeed, while it might seem for the briefest of moments desirable to think of your worst enemy dead, out of your life and therefore not a problem anymore, a common sense morality stops the virtuous person from taking such an imagining any further. Indeed, such imaginings simply exist as fleeting moments of entertained fantasy and do not form the basis of anything that an individual might be judged upon seriously. It would be irrational to judge someone who briefly imagines their worst enemy dead as having murderous intentions generally. Even the most virtuous of human beings can entertain such immoral thoughts. The difference lies in assessing those willing to act on immoral imaginings, or at least pursue an imagining to the extent they appear to be willing to act, in some way, to make it more than an imagining.

Fantasy, originating from the Greek word *phantasia* refers to our ability to entertain images and ideas. The "lively imagination ... can vividly represent ... things, voices, or actions with the exactness of reality, and this faculty may readily be acquired by ourselves if we desire it."²⁹ This definition of the imagination and the ability it holds to entertain subjects which do not exist in reality leads to another Greek word *phantazethia*: "a verb used specifically ... for the faculty of entertaining appearances."³⁰ This suggests fantasy, especially imaginative fantasy, to be a means of picturing oneself in a certain way. This is certainly true of age players engaging in fantasy within a virtual world. Age players take on character roles, picturing themselves as a child, or a parent as part of their collective fantasy. More than this, age players not only imagine themselves in a way different to their own reality, they represent themselves in the form of avatars which resemble their imaginative constructs. By entering a virtual world in order to engage their fantasy, an age player must register a username, create an avatar and learn how to use the virtual world. This is different to merely imagining an age play scenario, this is the active pursuit of the scenario itself. An age play fantasy, as a product of the imagination, affords those who engage it a gratification of desires otherwise held internal.

Age play in a virtual world is much different to simply sexualising a child in the mind. The virtual world provides props that assist the fantasy, making it something more realistic, and more tangible than any imaginative construct can be. The malleable nature of a virtual world allows people to design their avatar to suit specific individual desires. In Second Life an avatar can be customised to resemble a child or take on any number of features the user dictates. Certainly, the mind affords us a similar level of creative freedom, but the mind is closed to others, the virtual world is much more social in nature. The age player is not just one person engaging a fantasy for their own benefit, they interact collectively as a community all pursuing gratification of a shared fantasy. It is the more complex nature of the pursuit of immoral fantasies in virtual world which makes them even more wrong than immoral imaginings. The sustained engagement of age play in this way shows the willingness of individuals to go against typical moral judgement in favour of an immoral fantasy. Age players effectively place themselves into the imaginative fantasy in a similar way that Moran believes dramatic imagination involves adopting a point of

²⁹ Quintilian, 'Institio Oratoria' (2006) <<http://honeyl.public.iastate.edu/quintilian/6/chapter2.html#29>> [accessed 17 May 2009] (para. 10 of 12).

³⁰ Eva T.H. Brann, *The World of The Imagination: Sum and Substance* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), p. 21.

view different to ones own.³¹

Dramatic imagining consists in the imaginative adoption of and identification with a certain point of view different from one's own. As mentioned previously, such adopted perspectives lead a related disposition. Thus, imaginatively adopting such a point of view usually involves imagining the respective evaluative and affective responses to given situations, and there is an awareness of what the imagining entails. Moran likens dramatic imagination to empathy, since we essentially place ourselves in somebody else's shoes when we imagine in this way. Furthermore, Moran believes that because of dramatic imagination it could be "easy to lose track of the difference between ... fantasy and acting out"³² The age player, therefore, does not simply accept idle propositions in the way that a daydreamer may entertain sexual fantasies. Their imagining is of the dramatic sort since they actively attempt to act out their fantasy, placing themselves into a virtual world in order to accomplish this. Since fantasies of the purely imaginative sort have already been proven to be morally problematic the pursuit of them in a virtual world is even more reprehensible.

Richard Wollheim gives the example of the erotic daydreamer to suggest that Moran is correct in stating that dramatic imagining may lead to confusion between fantasy and acting out. The erotic daydreamer imagines themselves engaged in sexual activity, and in doing so imagines themselves being sexually aroused. As the daydreamer imagines themselves being aroused they will actually become aroused in reality.³³ Wollheim believes this suggests that imagination can provide real emotions. If this is so then the imagination is quite clearly corrupting. If the example were changed to one which is morally problematic, unlike Wollheim's, then the arousal that results from the fantasy would be condemned. If we can condemn an imagination for causing this corruption in the immoral case, then we can certainly condemn those that take fantasies a step further into the virtual world. The erotic daydreamer is simply entertaining something in thought, and this happens to lead to arousal, as is the case when people imagine sexually appealing situations. This is very much different to the age player. Certainly, they will have the imaginative experience that leads to arousal in the same way as the erotic daydreamer, but the age player does even more than this. The virtual world provides a means to pursue this arousal, and satisfy themselves by indulging in the imaginative act in a way which can provide them with something more like the active experience they crave. This craving leads to the pursuit of the fantasy, and is not the same as passing time by daydreaming about things you might find arousing.

An age player pursues their fantasy because it appeals in the imagination, and this fantasy is difficult to control. It is because of imagination that people wish to age play, without it reason might easier overcome the desire and fantasy that imagination fuels. Indeed, without an imagination and without the ability to engage fantasy Adam might not have eaten the forbidden fruit. An imaginative faculty can tempt one in ways that would otherwise be unsuitable, as Richard Kearney suggests "Adam was attracted to the forbidden fruit because he had imagination. Each time they felt tempted to exercise their fantasy, Adam's descendants strayed off the path."³⁴

³¹ Moran, p. 104.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 81-82.

³⁴ Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 39-43.

This picture implies that fantasies and the imagination house concepts that are otherwise closed to us, and that the imagination can be corrupting because imagination allows us to entertain concepts we might otherwise refuse or reject in reality. This is not to condemn imagination in general as corrupting, since without imagination we could not perceive the world around us or have access to the creative faculties which allow us to express ourselves.

To age play in a virtual world is therefore to engage an imaginative fantasy, and actively pursue the fantasy into the virtual world. There are parts of the age play fantasy that appeal to those of deficient moral character (the role of dominator/domineer), and parts which should be quite obviously immoral (the fact that the act consists of simulated child molestation). The positive aspect of the fantasy exists because imagination allows us to toy with ideas we might otherwise reject. Fantasies of an immoral nature can not only be played out in the mind, but pursued in a virtual world where people can enact the fantasies they imagine. Imagining age play, and habitually wishing to pursue an age play fantasy leads people to ignore their better moral judgement and act out their imaginings within the virtual world. However, the imagination is morally accountable, this has been proven, so the pursuit of an imaginative fantasy which might be considered wrong is just another step down a slippery slope towards moral insensitivity and corruption of the moral character. Imaginings can be wrong, but not harmful, this has been displayed,. Imaginings like age play actively sought within a virtual world such as Second Life can be wrong but not harmful too, they are therefore an example of harmless wrongdoing.

5. Conclusion – The Moral Accountability of Imagination and Virtual World

It has been shown that immoral imaginings, and the pursuit of immoral imaginings in virtual worlds are examples of harmless wrongdoing. In these situations, individuals entertain or pursue immoral imaginings, and as a result cause damage to their own moral character. The examples provided have displayed that immoral imaginings do not have victims, and do not harm anyone, but may still be morally assessed.³⁵ We should not entertain certain activities because doing so degrades our moral character, and confuses our ‘moral compass’. Since this is the case, the pursuit of immoral imaginings is also a case of wrongdoing. Within a virtual world nobody is harmed when an individual seeks to live their fantasy. No child is ever harmed when age players conduct their role play, yet we still feel that what they do is morally wrong. This is a justified feeling since what we imagine gives evidence of our dispositions, and the possibility that individuals will be open to immoral concepts. Not only this, the age player simply fails to resist an imagining which is morally questionable. The lack of harm is not enough of a reason to conclude that what age players do is not morally assessable.

As an example of harmless wrongdoing, we must approach the imagination of certain concepts, and our pursuit of seemingly harmless fantasies with caution. The pursuit or entertainment of a fantasy is not risk free, and is not exempt from moral judgement. We have the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, and as such have a duty to resist those imaginings which

³⁵ Once again, excluding harm to oneself of course, which is not included in the definition of harmless wrongdoing. This only involves harm where other parties are involved.

obviously raise moral problems. To pursue them is to ignore this important fact and show an individual lack of moral sensitivity.

Examples of harmless wrongdoings are certainly difficult to present, and there appear to be few examples of wrongs which are not accompanied by harm. However, immoral imagination, and resulting conduct within a virtual world is one which fits well into Feinberg's definition of what harmless wrongdoing consists of. The virtual world is a playground in which moral imaginings may be acted out and represented. Imaginative objects of fantasy and desire; of actions rejected in reality can be easily pursued. If it is wrong to imagine a child in a sexual situation then it is certainly wrong to enter a virtual world and pursue such an imagining as fantasy, regardless of the fact nobody is ever really harmed. Age play conducted purely in the imagination, or within a virtual world is wrong because of the damage it does to us, and our moral character, in entertaining and pursuing immoral concepts. Immoral imaginings and their pursuit within virtual worlds are wrongful acts without harm, and therefore suitable examples of harmless wrongdoings.

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